

## Men's and women's spheres among couples from Maniitsoq (Greenland)

## Les sphères des hommes et des femmes parmi des couples de Maniitsoq (Groenland)

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Volume 30, numéro 1, 2006

Problématiques des sexes  
Gender issues

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016153ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/016153ar>

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### Éditeur(s)

Association Inuksiutiit Katimajit Inc.  
Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

### ISSN

0701-1008 (imprimé)  
1708-5268 (numérique)

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### Citer cette note

Williamson, K. J. (2006). Men's and women's spheres among couples from Maniitsoq (Greenland). *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 30(1), 123–133.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/016153ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Cet article concerne les relations entre les sexes et présente des données originales provenant d'une étude empirique effectuée chez les Kalaallit (Inuit du Groenland) de Maniitsoq (sud-ouest du Groenland). Le but de l'étude était de savoir comment les rôles sexuels sont perçus par les Kalaallit. Sept couples furent interviewés à propos de leurs tâches dans différents contextes. Toutes les femmes interviewées ont un travail et elles décrivent aussi leurs activités à la maison. Elles sont impliquées dans des activités sociales (incluant celles liées à l'Église) bien plus que leurs maris. Cinq des maris ont un travail mais seulement quatre s'adonnaient à la chasse «récréative». Les maris participent moins aux activités de l'Église mais trouvent une inspiration spirituelle en mer, pendant qu'ils chassent. Par contre, ces hommes kalaallit sont en train de devenir plus isolés socialement. La note de recherche se termine avec une présentation de trois modèles de couples identifiés à Maniitsoq: traditionnel, détaché et inversé.

# Men's and women's spheres among couples from Maniitsoq (Greenland)

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Karla Jessen Williamson\*

**Résumé:** Les sphères des hommes et des femmes parmi des couples de Maniitsoq (Groenland)

Cet article concerne les relations entre les sexes et présente des données originales provenant d'une étude empirique effectuée chez les Kalaallit (Inuit du Groenland) de Maniitsoq (sud-ouest du Groenland). Le but de l'étude était de savoir comment les rôles sexués sont perçus par les Kalaallit. Sept couples furent interviewés à propos de leurs tâches dans différents contextes. Toutes les femmes interviewées ont un travail et elles décrivent aussi leurs activités à la maison. Elles sont impliquées dans des activités sociales (incluant celles liées à l'Église) bien plus que leurs maris. Cinq des maris ont un travail mais seulement quatre s'adonnaient à la chasse «récréative». Les maris participent moins aux activités de l'Église mais trouvent une inspiration spirituelle en mer, pendant qu'ils chassent. Par contre, ces hommes kalaallit sont en train de devenir plus isolés socialement. La note de recherche se termine avec une présentation de trois modèles de couples identifiés à Maniitsoq: traditionnel, détaché et inversé.

**Abstract:** Men's and women's spheres among couples from Maniitsoq (Greenland)

This paper looks at gender relations and presents original findings of an empirical study among the Kalaallit (Greenland Inuit) of Maniitsoq (southwest Greenland). The focus of the study was to figure out what gender roles look like in Kalaallit eyes. Seven couples were interviewed about what work entails in different contexts. All the women interviewed have a job, and they describe their activities in their own homes. They are involved in social activities (including those related to the Church) much more so than their husbands, and have more control on the values involved in raising their children. Five of the husbands had a job but only four were involved in "recreational" hunting. Husbands are less inclined in Church matters but find spiritual connection while out on the sea and hunting. But these Kalaallit men are becoming more socially isolated. The paper ends with the presentation of three models of couplehood in Maniitsoq: traditional; detached; and reversed.

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## Introduction

Kalaallit have enjoyed political self-government for less than 30 years, and take great pride in having been one of the first indigenous people around the world to gain control of state administration from colonial powers. Societal changes in Greenland

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have been great whereby the hunting-based Inuit society has become a Westernized, more industrial society. The changes that occurred since the Second World War have had a galvanizing effect on Greenlandic society. Kalaallit are culturally influenced by Inuit traditions while at the same time strongly attracted to Qallunaat ways. In such a setting of post-colonial cultural changes, this paper attempts to understand Kalaallit gender relations by looking at the roles of men and women among couples from Maniitsoq (southwest Greenland) within their homes.

### ***Inuit gender roles***

Inuit's work is carried out to ensure a safe continuation of human relationship with the various animal and land souls. The Inuit reverence and nurturance of their environment results in the land's approval, thereby gifting human beings with physical and spiritual sustenance. Traditionally, Inuit men and women had defined roles, "but they made up a team, complemented each one another, and were very much equal in standing" (Kawagley 2006: 18). The fact that men and women work differently does not in any way undermine their respective activities. Each individual is to ensure a working relationship with the animated and spiritual world. Inuit see the division of labour as the best means of relating with their surroundings. Gender-based division of labour is a valued social practice necessary for enjoying the products from the earth. In essence, gender-based work simply consists in each one doing their best with the qualities with which they have been endowed.

*Arnaassuseq* ('femaleness') and *angutaassuseq* ('maleness') carry with them manifestations of humanity and their distinctive qualities are highly cherished (Jessen Williamson 2000). Inuit have clearly defined expectations of how men ought to behave and present themselves in the contexts of family, community, and soul networks. Inuit men are expected to invest their energies in reasonable and sensitive use of their surroundings (the land and the animals) and only to the extent that this use meets the needs of family and community. Just like the men, women are expected to be sensitive to the needs of their family, community, the land and the animals.

### **Methodology**

The data used in this paper was collected originally for my PhD studies. Fieldwork was undertaken from 1998 to 2000 in Maniitsoq, a town of 2000 people located on the southwestern coast of Greenland. Created a little less than 225 years ago, it was intermittently called Sukkertoppen by Danes during the colonial era. It is a municipal centre in the Meqqitsoq area, meaning 'lacks feathers': in this case, vegetation. The majority of the population of Maniitsoq is of Inuit descent. There are few Danes living there and even fewer individuals from elsewhere. Most of the Maniitsormiut (people in Maniitsoq) live in apartment buildings, where living facilities compare to what is available in Europe. The town depends heavily on fishing and there were a number of shrimp trawlers owned by successful entrepreneurs. It was and remains one of the

biggest centres in Greenland. Attempts to find a stereotypically traditional “Eskimo” lifestyle in Maniitsoq would result in disappointment.

I grew up in Maniitsoq and felt important to include a team of co-researchers to discuss issues to be addressed and potential people to interview. I thus worked with the help of six Kalaallit research partners who all reside in Maniitsoq. Each one was invited to suggest questions that may illuminate some aspects on the postcolonial gender relations in Maniitsoq. Although our research group felt that today Kalaallit live very differently from previous generations, we had difficulties evaluating what happened to the original egalitarian principles of the Inuit. Today, how do men and women behave to express gender equality in their homes? Our research group had grown up in times when our own parents and grandparents practised a very visibly gendered division of labour, which we perceived to be traditional and fairly predictable. However, we found that the partition of labour and the delineation of the roles today are unpredictable since socio-cultural patterns have changed so drastically from the time of our births (1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s).

To identify and understand the changes that took place in Inuit gender roles, we interviewed seven couples from Maniitsoq. We gave each couple a fictitious name: Aningaaq, Nukartaakkut, Najakkut, Akulliit, Mumingasukkut, Aqqaluakkut and Angajullikkut. The couples were interviewed about the activities performed by men and women and I categorised the responses in the following spheres: inside the house; outside the house; social activities; hunting; recreation; health; social values and raising children; and Church-related issues. The results were compiled in tables that list their answers according to their sex (see Jessen Williamson 2006). In the following section, the data from the interviews is presented and discussed.

## **Women's sphere of activities**

### ***Inside the house***

Generally speaking the women interviewed looked after the décor for their homes. They chose the colour of furniture and curtains, for example. They decided on the pictures to be hung and the kind of furniture bought. In traditional Inuit houses, plants would have not been seen, but since colonial times and certainly over the last 40 years or so, house plants have become part of the household, and women are the ones who choose them.

One great change that has happened within the last 10 years is that women do not necessarily have the task of cutting up any mammals brought to land by the husband. Many of the husbands are now totally responsible for butchering the animals caught. This trend was very obvious across all the interviews. One of the elderly interviewees even wondered if the wives of the hunters ever get to hear how, where and what husbands had caught, and would probably never even see the animals caught. Just a generation ago, besides butchering the mammals, the woman would likely have been the person who looked after the pattern of distributing the meat.

Many women are responsible for the daily cooking. The trend is to prepare the local food using European or Asian cooking techniques. However, due to what the men call *pinialunneq* ('recreational hunts') most of the interviewed men have become responsible for looking after the traditional food preparation, although some of the couples interviewed prepared the food together by drying, smoking, and freezing, and they deeply expressed appreciation of this kind of food. To many individuals such practices give great satisfaction through the associated cultural and identity values, especially knowing that many generations have enjoyed this kind of food, and they themselves become part of continuing cultural practices. The new ways of preparing the traditional food offer the Kalaallit women and men an opportunity to show how accepting and modern they are in terms of the very rapid cultural changes.

### *Social values and raising children*

Most of the women interviewed expressed that they felt responsible for instilling "social" practices in their household members. It seems that Kalaallit women have gained great influence in external relations and they are responsible for the physical appearance and behaviour of their husbands and children. Many of the women decided on the style of clothing their children and husbands wore. However, they may not always get away with it, as the Akulliit husband declared. He disliked clothes that are too showy, unlike his wife who preferred them. Many women even decide their husband's hairstyle in addition to the hairstyles of their children.

Women claim to hold the primary responsibility for bringing up their children; most interviewed felt in much greater control of this area than men. This particular aspect does not necessarily sit well with all wives. The Aningaaq wife conscientiously made an effort to unload family responsibilities on her husband. She realised that she had taken on too much over the years, and she was literally instructing her husband on how to take on some of the family responsibilities.

### *Social activities*

Much has been written about Kalaallit families centring on the patriarchy in the past, such that extended family ties were initiated through the fathers and male siblings (Petersen 2003). In today's context, this notion is challenged by our findings. Female family connections are the major ties today, compared with just a generation or so ago. More recently, during the last generation or so, the Kalaallit have been experiencing a strong matriarchal society (Dybbroe 1988; Jessen Williamson 2006). Our results indicate that women are in greater control of social life than men. Many of the interviewed men said that their wives determined who entered their homes as guests. It seems that the female family relations are the ones mostly invited for high celebration purposes such as birthdays, baptisms, confirmation, weddings, and funerals. Very few male relatives enter the house and men rarely receive visits from their own families. Instead, the wife's family often visits.

## ***Church-related activities***

It seems that the sphere of religiosity is a more feminine one. Women interviewed were much more inclined to adhere to the Lutheran church practices than their male counterparts. As the Najakkut wife declared, she was the one in the household who held onto the religious aspects much more than her husband. The wife said she was more unquestioning of the church-related issues than her husband, who tended to cynically question church matters.

This was also true for the Akulliit family; the husband preferred to go out boating while the wife attended church. She became annoyed about his strong insistence to go hunting. She felt that his absence had become an excuse not to do his chores around the house. He, on the other hand, said that his lack of church attendance had very little to do with his religiosity or spirituality. He felt that being out there away from urbanisation made him feel spiritual (land relatedness) without needing to have that confirmed through church sermons.

Among the Angajullikkut couple, the wife had opened up her own Sunday school for the children of the town, but in this family the husband was just as appreciative of the church and Lutheran beliefs as his wife. Contrary to the other couples, in the Mumingasukkut family, the husband was the one who felt the responsibility of instilling the religious beliefs and practices in their children. He was also the one who taught the children the *oqaassutit* ('proverbs').

The young husband of the Aqquallukut couple liked church gatherings, though not so much for the sake of the religion but for the occasions, the large coming together of families. His wife did not attend church services regularly but insisted that she made a point of listening to the broadcast church sermons on Sunday mornings. That statement explained to me why generally women pursue church activities more actively. The church functions as a social conduit for power dynamics. Women get their alliances through the church, and feel more obligated to attend the services since the latter act also as channels for social relations within their own families.

## **Men's sphere of activities**

### ***Outside the house***

The men's sphere strongly applies to the external areas of the household. In many cases, this relates to men having to look after the boat of the family. A good part of the house repairs and renovation work falls to the men. Inside the homes, the men's area is looking after the technical and mechanical aspects of the household. For example, men continue to keep the task of sharpening knives of the household. The husband generally looks after the furnace room and household machinery. Two of the interviewed men had built their own homes.

Out of the seven couples interviewed, two couples lived in apartments. Today, many more Greenlanders live in apartments rather than owning their own homes and this reality must drastically alter the expectations of both men and women with regard to the male sphere of duty surrounding their abodes. One of the interviewees reflected on this situation and concluded that men's identity is much related to doing repair work on the outside of the house, and men living in apartments have no way of attaining this role. He felt that men's identity is thus compromised, and many men must lack a sense of value.

### ***Recreational hunting***

Most of the interviewed men carried out *pinialunneq* ('recreational hunts') and the produce of their hunts constituted the main meals of the family. The Mumingasukkut couple had no access to boating even through their extended family connections, and due to their financial concerns they had chosen to eat imported Danish foods. In the case of the Aqqaluakut couple, both came from families that cherished traditional food and hunting, and both had access to these through family connections. But much like the Mumingasukkut couple, this couple decided to rely on Danish food since it was more economical.

Sejersen (1998) mentioned that eating *kalaalimerngit* ('traditional food') was part of the Greenlandic identity. As this seems to be the case for most Kalaallit in Maniitsoq, it was surprising to realise that the Mumingasukkut and Aqqaluartaakut couples do not eat much *kalaalimerngit* due to financial circumstances. The two were young couples with several young children and they made their choice of not living off the local food because it was too expensive. Instead they relied on the subsidised Danish imported food, which they adamantly claimed to be generally much cheaper than the local food.

### ***Isolated men***

As I started to analyse the interviews, I could not help noticing the fact that many of the interviewed men found themselves isolated and preferred this seclusion to socialising even inside their homes. As stated earlier, the extended family ties are more often strongly connected through the wife, and at least two interviewed men stated that they rarely saw their siblings. The Nukartaaq husband expressed the isolation or seclusion by saying that he withdrew and did not participate much in hosting houseguests but instead preferred to be in the background when there were guests in their home. He and the Akulliit husband expressed the fact that all the socialising that happened in their house was something that was arranged and decided by their wives. The Akulliit husband saw very little of his own siblings despite the fact that they live in town.

The non-involvement of men also happened with regard to child rearing, which women strongly felt as their primary role. However, the Aningaak wife had been overwhelmed by the expectations of her role, and had decided to share some of her

responsibilities on her husband. This included shopping for gifts for birthdays and Christmas, and taking on more of the responsibility regarding the children.

The isolation of men is also expressed in their dispassion for church functions, which we have established as being the main conduit for social relations. Men do attend church services but do it more out of family obligation than for the sake of religiosity. This is not to say that men are less religiously engaged but, rather, that they express their religiosity differently from women. After all, many more men than women actively pursue the recreational hunts, an exercise closer to the environment than most women experience, and which is considered a deeply spiritual experience in terms of communion with nature, *i.e.* the land and the animals (Bodenhorn 1990; Fienup-Riordan 1990; Kawagley 2006).

### *The collaboration of couples in Maniitsoq*

Without any exception, all the couples declared love to be the foundation for their collaboration in their relationship, and this is refreshing since most books on Inuit relationships rarely mention love. What is portrayed is mainly physical but I am certain that love comes into the picture within most Inuit marriages and does develop among couples including in the marriages arranged by others. This was previously discussed by an Inuk elder in Canada (Wachowich 1999).

Thriftiness among the Maniitsoq couples was not necessarily discussed directly, but it is an important characteristic among couples. Many of the couples talked about buying furniture and clothes when they were on sale, and often both wife and husband were frugal. Women do a lot of their own sewing to save money, and many men go out hunting to contribute food to the table. While each individual exercises her or his own form of economy, collaborative financial thriftiness in order to set priorities seems important among the Maniitsoq couples interviewed.

Even with just the data collected among the seven couples interviewed for this research, three patterns of couplehood can be discerned. There is what I call the “traditional” model, exemplified by the Nukartaakkut, Akulliit, and Angajullikkut. Among such couples the kind of work they do in their homes is very much delineated by gender, including the expectations surrounding their tasks. The collaboration also seems very regular and explicitly negotiated.

The second model denotes relationships in which expected collaborations are not necessarily obvious; each individual carries out tasks independently without necessarily making any reference to the partner. This is the “detached” couple model. The Angingaaq and Najakkut couples practised this kind of marriage. Here, the wives had separate bank accounts, earned their own incomes and handled their own finances. As the Najakkut wife told me, her husband looked after paying the telephone and electricity bills, and the mortgage on the boat. She paid for the apartment rent and the food. In case of the Angingaaq couple, the wife had her own car and snow scooter, and felt independent enough to make decisions without the participation of her husband.



When I presented this model to the research group in Maniitsoq, several of the women were openly surprised that some women in town indeed had their own bank accounts.

The third model is what I called the “*mumingasukkut*” (‘reversed couple’). This couple volunteered their own interview, and I was very grateful to them since the research group did not identify this couple initially as being a respondent pair for research interviewing. The husband in this couple was the homemaker while his wife was the breadwinner. She had professional work and earned the family income, and was completely detached from housework and the instilling of social responsibility in her children. She looked after all the financial aspects of her family; he did housework, and looked after all the plants and the décor of the apartment. Women in our research group were surprised that a couple like the *Mumingasukkut* exists in Maniitsoq.

I did not in any way sense that the above models presented better or less successful marriages. Throughout the interviews and certainly across the various models I noticed a strong devotion to one another among all the couples. The above models only speak to different ways in which marriages work in Maniitsoq. I am certain that other models of marriages can also be found.

Finding different models indicates that each couple explicitly negotiated their individual roles within their unique establishment. Each couple recognised the talents and skills of their partners and collaborated on their duties accordingly. Hence, the Nukartaaq wife took on the baking, the general housecleaning, laundry, wall washing, dusting, and vacuuming. She also did the grocery shopping so that her husband could, in return, look after the children doing their school homework, since he was further educated and therefore best suited to this task. The *Mumingasukkut* husband decided to support his wife through her education. He realised that she was much more talented with regard to education and in this respect it made more sense that she be the breadwinner. To balance this, he took on the task of being the homemaker.

## **Discussion**

### ***New development in marriages***

Traditional hunting-based societies divided work that is accentuated by gender, and the lines seemed very clear. This is also true for the Kalaallit society. Today, due to cultural changes the lines have become blurred, and couples are left to their own devices to figure out what will work according to their individual needs and those as a couple. The models that I presented earlier exemplify that the issues surrounding the division of work will escalate to something different from previous generations as the Kalaallit society becomes increasingly industrialised and Westernised. Some of the developments have already been expressed by the *Najakkut* couple: the husband is taking on responsibilities that used to be associated with women’s work. He does the vacuuming, the dishes, and laundry. The *Mumingasukkut* husband has totally reversed the standard roles of men.

### *Couples experiencing problems*

Our research group had never thought to ask anything about marriage problems, yet these were brought up by the people interviewed. Each of the couples emphasised how their own home should be a place of peace for them as a couple and for their children. This obviously is only attainable through effective problem solving. The Aningaag husband conveyed that he came from a family with a strong traditional background and he had the tendency to use that as a model in bringing up children. His wife on the other hand came from a much less traditional household but wanted their daughter to learn traditional skills. The husband taught their sons hunting skills, but their daughter had not been taught anything in this respect.

The Nukartaakut couple's disagreements usually occurred around child-rearing practices. Coming from different homes with different values, setting up a household in which a new set of social values has to be negotiated is not an easy task. During our conversations the use or, rather, misuse of alcohol came up. The husband had an alcohol problem, and the wife reacted to his behaviour in a hurtful, vindictive way. Furthermore, her response to his alcoholism was heavy cigarette smoking. As well, the Nukartaag husband felt that the differences between them on how the finances needed to be organised presented a difficult issue for them. He wanted to be free of any bills, and his wife had a tendency to buy goods while being indifferent to their economic situation. Obviously their differences had created rifts in their marriage and they were working steadily at making their marriage work by trying to understand what their individual emotional needs were, and understanding how each one of them needed nurturing in their personal growth.

The Najakkut couple had experienced difficulty regarding child-rearing practices. The wife often felt that her husband reacted angrily when correcting their child. The husband is not an outgoing person and he complains about her being far too outgoing, particularly when she is inebriated (he does not drink). They did not share social spheres.

The Aningaag couple is experiencing a lot of stress since the husband is absent a good part of the year participating in the trawling fishery. The husband's absence usually lasted up to three months at a time, and after he had landed, he was at home for a couple of weeks and went off again. This kind of practice is new to Inuit, as couples worked together in most economic activities and shared responsibilities. Where trawling is involved, the wife takes on all the household responsibilities, and as far as the Aningaag wife was concerned, such a practice was so new that she found no one to whom she could ask advice. She felt that many couples who rely on trawling for their livelihood go through a lot of troubles without much sympathy or understanding from others, and efforts have not been made to replace the husband's role in daily family operations. Maniitsoq relies heavily on trawling activity since early 1970s, and many of the industrialised men become part of the crews. I tried to interview a number of young women who are in such relationships, but they all declined.

Our research group discussed the impact of new economic and social developments in Greenland (*e.g.*, future jobs related to oil and gas exploitation) on the life of couples. We all expressed concerns that the politicians and social workers will have to recognise problems associated with the long-time absence of workers. Social programs may have to be developed to offset any negative impact on families in the future.

During my fieldwork, I had contacted a number of young couples whom my research partners had recommended that I interview. I was surprised by their decline since I had thought that they would find the experience of being part of the research interesting. I wondered for a long time about their disinterest. I later thought that the ongoing negotiation between the partners—that is, in establishing their relationship as a couple—was still so young that they perhaps did not want a nosy novice anthropologist to complicate the process.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to look at gender relations among the Kalaallit in post-colonial setting. Seven couples living in Maniitsoq were interviewed regarding their division of labour in different contexts. Although the women interviewed have a job, all but one is doing the housework and most of the cooking activities. They are also involved in more social activities (particularly those related to the Church) than their husbands, and have more control on the values involved in raising their children. Husbands were more likely to find a spiritual connection while hunting, but also to be more isolated. Five of the husbands had a job but only four were involved in hunting. At the end of the paper, three models of couplehood were discussed: traditional; detached; and reversed.

Today, life conditions in the Arctic are very different from that of the past due to changes from a hunting-based Inuit life to a much Westernised Kalaallit lifestyle. The absorption of Western values is much encouraged in Greenland and the degree to which this happens depends on the individual. This is reflected in the way Kalaallit negotiate their place in society, and especially household duties in their couple. The homes we visited were modern-day Western-style dwellings. Some couples live in their own houses, either self-built or purchased, while others live in government-owned apartments. In this modern-day context, paid work seems to be undertaken for the purpose of being able to afford a lifestyle that is based on money. These premises are very different from those in which our fore-parents lived.

## **Acknowledgments**

Funding for the research was provided by the Home Rule Government of Greenland; Nuna Banken; the Research Office of the University of Calgary through the Arctic Institute of North America; and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, Canada. I also extend my gratitude to research collaborators in Maniitsoq: Maria

Sommer, Bilha Nielsen, Bolethe Skifte, Vivi Lyberth, Helleborg Lyberth, Marianne Heilmann, and Mimi Karlsen.

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